The Partnership Model For Service-Learning Programs: A Step-By-Step Approach

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ABSTRACT

Service-Learning is a hot topic in higher education today, but the importance of streamlining processes for community service will never go out of style. Generally, universities, faculty, communities, and students value the concept of civic engagement. However, it is challenging for educators to provide meaningful service, which offers valuable learning opportunities, while trying to meet academic expectations of rigor and research. The Partnership Model for Service-Learning provides a visual framework for organizing sustainable programs and leads to collective impact. It is a model that “ties it all together”, seamlessly connecting teaching, scholarship, and service. In addition to a step-by-step framework for constructing a service-learning program, this article presents case examples to illustrate the differences between “project-based” and “program-based” pedagogical approaches. Finally, student-perceived impacts of service-learning are quantified, via Likert scale, in the associated areas (Callister and Hobbins-Garbett, 2000), of personal satisfaction, impact on professional development, critical thinking, awareness of unmet community needs, and feelings of preparedness for practice, for both the project-based and program-based case examples.

Keywords: Service-Learning; Partnership; Scholarship Of Teaching and Learning; Civic Engagement

INTRODUCTION

There are many scholarly articles which have defined service-learning, offered examples of implemented projects, and provided “tried and true” reflection activities. What is missing for many educators, though, is a comprehensive model that pulls together a design for sustainable programming. What does a dynamic service-learning partnership look like? How can an educator build an on-going program that improves over time? Where do students fit within this framework? This article will differentiate between project-based and program-based methods of service-learning and will define key steps for the development of a sustainable partnership.

SERVICE-LEARNING LESSONS

The Project-Based Method of Service-Learning

Service-learning is known for its barriers; anyone who has ever dabbled in civic engagement will tell you that it’s complicated and “messy”. Some of the more commonly recognized barriers to effective engagement, from a community agency’s standpoint, were summarized well by Strom (2009): 1) Students show up, interrupt, and ask, “What can I do here?” 2) People with already taxing jobs end up with the responsibility of supervising students, like it or not, 3) student volunteers are seen as having their own agendas, with little “return” for the agencies, and 4) students and professors cannot expect to change the world in twenty hours over a single semester.

The service-learning experience described (Strom, 2009) is not unusual, in part, because educators frequently set out to find a site (or location) for a project rather than seeking an agency for an on-going, service-learning partnership. The project-based model (Figure 1) represents the “one-time” service-learning experiences, set up by faculty, in an effort to incorporate experiential learning into an already-overloaded clinical schedule. This method of service-learning can be frustrating to everyone involved. Faculty feel pressure to do service, community agencies feel pressure to work with students, and students become so focused on all the unknown factors and with doing an assignment that they are unable to concentrate on the bigger picture - meeting real needs of real people.

Figure 1: Project-Based Model

In a project-based model, the community partnership may be described as “uncommitted”. This means that at the end of the semester, there are no discussions of an on-going relationship or future collaboration between the university and the community partner. The project-based model includes a faculty member and community partner/agency as one primary relationship and the faculty and student as a separate, primary relationship. Students are unintentionally bumped to a position “below” faculty. There may be high levels of critical thinking and involvement, but they belong to the educators, rather than the students.

The link between students and community agency is very limited in a project-based approach. Students may certainly spend time investigating the needs of the target population and implementing their “service” within that community. However, since there is no on-going partnership, students (and faculty) may find themselves focused on a particular assignment developed in order to help the students meet the needs of one agency at one moment in time. When that assignment is complete, the project is over. This creates little opportunity for quality improvement, for program growth, and sadly, little-to-no measurable impact within the community.

In addition to the more obvious problems with using a project-based model are issues for faculty members. Finding a willing site, maintaining appropriate contracts, developing new assignments, and beginning again every semester is exhausting. There is no time for a meaningful study or for scholarly outcomes because faculty members are too busy just trying to keep up.

Example of Project-Based Service-Learning

Service-Learning Project at WIC (Women, Infants and Children)

In Spring 2009, a project-based service-learning experience was required for junior-level baccalaureate nursing students in which they assessed the target population (WIC recipients from a southwestern county in Ohio) and developed small group, educational presentations for the female participants. Four clinical sections (seven students each) rotated through the experience as part of their required clinical course. Health topics were chosen based on the established mission and priorities of the agency, as well as agency-identified concerns. Students completed literature reviews for current, evidence-based information, and they delivered the health-related information to females through PowerPoint presentations, small group activities, games, and interactive discussions. Students rated their experiences on a Likert scale (Table 1) and completed reflective journaling activities.

Table 1: WIC Project Feedback
Student Ratings: 1-5, 5 is Highest Rating

N=28	Mean
Personal Satisfaction	3.40
Professional Development	4.20
Critical Thinking Skills	3.60
Awareness of Unmet Community Needs	3.85
Feelings of Preparedness for Practice	4.03
Combined Project Mean	3.82

Overall, students were satisfied with the experience, the WIC staff was grateful to have students involved in teaching a few sessions of their required classes, and the WIC recipients sat through their required sessions with no audible complaints. Student comments revolved around the tasks they completed and about individual contributions. There were not comments about interactions with the clients or with associated outcomes for the community. About the project, one student stated, “Our chosen topic was great...we had great information, we were well-organized, and the presentation had great flow and balance...My contributions included my individual research....I also brought in some fruit and spinach for the gift basket giveaway.”

“Great”...But, Now What?

The “now what?” question is particularly important for healthcare providers bound to the scientific process in what becomes common sense as a practitioner. The Assessing, Diagnosing, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADPIE) steps, credited to Ida Jane Orlando (1972), are deeply engrained in nursing. However, as educators, we often set out to “serve” without incorporating these basic nursing principles. Unless a systematically developed service agenda is identified, service-learning becomes a burden for all stakeholders. Without the cyclical re-evaluation and revision to implementation plans, service and service-learning never evolve or improve.

Service-Learning Definitions

Bittle, Dugglby, and Ellison (2002) combined ideas from Greenberg (1995), Seifer (1998), and Shah and Glascoff (1998) to define essential elements of service-learning as 1) meaningful service, 2) reciprocity, 3) development of leadership, and 4) reflection. By definition, service-learning projects meet these standards. In order for service to become sustainable, though, a fifth essential element of service-learning must be considered. This element is partnership.

Moving toward Authentic Partnership

Collective ideas about service-learning tend to stir up a sense of giving of selfless acts of volunteerism and of good-willed philanthropy. These are important components of service and they matter. However, partnership is not entirely concerned with what we have to offer others. Partnership requires a willingness of each partner to work together and to move forward together. Because of partnerships, we are afforded new understandings of community needs and we are enabled to develop innovative strategies in order to address the mutually identified priorities. This foundation contributes to the fundamental differences between a service-learning project and a service-learning program.

Steps to Developing a Service-Learning Program

The Partnership Model for Service-Learning (Figure 2) was first alluded to by Flinders in “Engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” (Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Key components of this model include: 1) community and university partnership, 2) student learning communities, 3) an expanded target population, 4) service-learning pedagogy, and 5) scholarly outcomes.

Figure 2: The Partnership Model for Service-Learning

The Partnership Model provides a framework to ensure a cohesive plan for teaching, scholarship, and service. For each step of the process, a description and case example follow. Although the specific examples of one successful program are provided to illustrate key concepts, it should be noted that this model can be utilized for service-learning in any discipline, with any type of service, and at any institution. It simply provides a way to organize and connect any cohesive, sustainable program.

Step One: Forge a Partnership

A committed “community partner” and the “faculty” serve as the center of the Partnership Model itself. These two fundamental figures may be specific or more global in nature. For example, a K-12 teacher, the university as a whole, or a department may fill the “faculty” spot. The “community partner” may be a particular agency, an entire school district, or a health department, which serves multiple counties throughout a state.

This model doesn’t limit users to one set of partnership standards. Real partnerships require flexibility, negotiation, and re-negotiation. In 2006, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) summarized the following key characteristics of “good partnerships”:

1. Partnerships form to serve a specific purpose and may take on new goals over time.
2. Partners have agreed upon mission, values, goals, measurable outcomes, and accountability for the partnership.
3. The relationship between partners is characterized by mutual trust, respect, genuineness, and commitment.
4. The partnership builds upon identified strengths and assets, but also works to address needs and increase capacity of all partners.
5. The partnership balances power among partners and enables resources among partners to be shared.
6. Partners make clear and open communication an ongoing priority by striving to understand each other's needs and self-interests, as well as developing a common language.
7. Principles and processes for the partnership are established with the input and agreement of all partners, especially for decision-making and conflict resolution.
8. There is feedback among all stakeholders in the partnership with the goal of continuously improving the partnership and its outcomes.
9. Partners share the benefits of the partnership's accomplishments.
10. Partnerships can dissolve and need to plan a process for closure.

While CCPH offers great suggestions for conducting partnerships, it is possible to select different criterion based upon individual program needs. The Partnership Model deals less with “what” and more with “how”.

Step 1: Case Example

In an effort to improve service-learning practice, an on-going partnership with a community agency became an immediate priority. Within the first twenty minutes of a meeting with a new Executive Director of the local YWCA, the discussion moved to the announcement of a grant opportunity funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services. It was a long shot, but this new potential community partner was willing to collaborate in order to educate local females - 16-19 years of age - regarding STI (sexually transmitted infection) and pregnancy prevention strategies. Following a month of frequent e-mails, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, and late nights, the Office of Adolescent Health announced that our collaborative program would receive a grant for over two million dollars (over five years). It is because of joint application for this grant that detailed plans for the partnership emerged. Every aspect of the program was discussed - a logic model was designed, staffing was planned, and the budget was justified as a team. Although the grant was the impetus for the detailed planning that occurred for this case example, the effort and collaboration that took place can be used as a model for all partnership building.

Step Two: Involve Students as Partners*Student Learning Communities*

Within the “Partnership Model”, on a parallel plane to the faculty and community partner, are the students. They are the “driving force” behind the work that is accomplished. They provide a constant free flow of service. These students bring new energy, ideas, and abilities with each semester. In the Partnership Model, students are encompassed in the category of “Student Learning Community”. This is a key component to the Partnership Model and is often a missed opportunity in service-learning design. Because students function within a learning community, side-by-side with their professor and peers, they are given an opportunity to work as a team in creating their own paths and in finding a common direction.

Much has been written about benefits of learning communities. Wenger (1998) outlines foundational principles, in summary, by stating that participants must 1) be engaged in “joint enterprise”, some compelling purpose or project that draws them together, 2) have common access to shared resources, and 3) maintain relationships through “mutual engagement” in trust-building activities.

Within the structure of a particular class or a particular semester, “bounded learning communities” may be developed as they are formed in response to instructor guidance and are supported by a “cumulative resource base”. Bounded learning communities work from the understanding that experiences are limited by class times, course objectives, and semester schedules (B. Wilson, S. Ludwig-Hardman, C. Thornam, & J. Dunlap, J., 2004). The faculty member’s role in a bounded community is to provide an infrastructure for interaction and work (through the course syllabus and other resources), to model effective collaboration and knowledge construction, to apply instructional strategies, to supervise students, to monitor and assess learning, to troubleshoot, and to establish trusting relationships with students (Wilson, et. al., 2004).

There is room for freedom in the Partnership Model to combine theories and methods that make sense for individual programs. It may be necessary to incorporate a variety of approaches based on the students’ learning needs or even course objectives. The Partnership Model only requires that students are involved as partners, that they are active team members, and that the team works with a common service agenda.

Step 2: Case Example

In this case example, principles of cooperative learning, as outlined by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1991), were incorporated into the basic structure of the student learning community. These principles include positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing. The service-learning program was designed to allow for maximum student input, creativity, and participation. Concepts from Barr and Tagg’s “learning paradigm” - a classic reference (1995) - were incorporated by creating an environment and an experience that would result in students “discovering and constructing knowledge for themselves”.

There are two levels within the learning community in this case example: 1) the “leadership team” and 2) students who participate in service-learning as part of their required 300-level nursing course.

The Program’s Leadership Team

The leadership team is made up of three Research Assistants and six Undergraduate Associates (UAs). The Research Assistants are paid positions and they are required to commit to eight hours per week. The UAs apply through the university’s Honor’s Program and they receive one honor’s credit in return for a thirty-hour commitment over the entire semester.

The leadership team is involved in each and every aspect of the program. They adapted surveys from original study questionnaires, they complete literature reviews in order to update curriculum, and they assist with the orientation of students and staff. In addition, they apply for internal funding for travel, they collaborate on the submission of abstracts and proposals for conference proceedings, they present at peer-reviewed conferences, and they assist with the collection of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) data. This team is continually evolving as new challenges arise. It is ensured that there is continuity in the leadership team through the inclusion of both juniors and seniors and because serving as a UA is a pre-requisite for an RA position.

Student Learning Communities Within a Required Course

The students, taking a required course with an embedded service-learning component, form the second layer of this student learning community. Junior-level nursing students deliver an eight-hour, evidence-based curriculum, during their regularly scheduled clinical days, to teens in community-based settings.

The undergraduates are oriented to the overall course and to the service-learning curriculum within the first two weeks of the semester. They are responsible for choosing the sections of the curriculum that they prefer to teach and for working together to implement the program with fidelity. Students arrive on week three, ready to present the curriculum during an on-campus practice session. They evaluate themselves and they make any necessary changes to their plans for implementation. Weeks four through seven are spent presenting the evidence-based curriculum in area high schools, vocational schools, or alternate community sites. Nursing faculty are present and provide “stand-by assistance” to students as they educate the teenage girls on safer sex and pregnancy prevention strategies.

Step 3: Serve an Expanded Target Population

The next component of the Partnership Model involves an expanded target population. Rather than meeting the needs of clients already served by a particular agency, outcomes grow exponentially benefitting from the “collective impact” of the university resources, the expert faculty member, the students, and the committed community partner. By aligning an agenda, efforts can be coordinated and real differences can be made. Since this relationship is an on-going partnership, continuous evaluation allows for improved processes and program growth.

Step 3: Case Example

The overall goal of the highlighted program is for teen participants to be educated, via an evidence-based curriculum, on the topics of pregnancy and STI prevention strategies. The YWCA did not previously meet this need in the community. However, through combined efforts, the YWCA and the university have been able to move outside the walls of the YWCA and to reach teens across four counties.

Step 4: Incorporate a Service-Learning Framework

Key elements of service-learning are incorporated within the framework of the Partnership Model. The reciprocal relationship is represented by the arrows that move from the students to the expanded target population and back. In addition to reciprocity, meaningful service, development of leadership, reflection, and authentic partnership should be included within the context of individual program agendas.

Case 4: Service-Learning Essential Elements

As a team, the learning community sets out to provide meaningful service while benefitting from a reciprocal relationship. They exert leadership skills to facilitate their own teams and to be effective educators within the community-based setting. Following their experiential learning opportunity, students complete a survey and reflection activity. Their partnerships with the community, with their professor, with the leadership team, and with one another take this experience to a level beyond what is possible with a project-based approach. Students are given a context and a history of the program to build upon and they are offered a voice to impact the on-going program during their implementation and reflection activities.

In addition to their completion of the Likert scale and written reflective piece, each clinical group participates in a “wrap-up session”. Students provide feedback on the course syllabus, the orientation, the required assignments, their available resources, their clinical support, and, finally, on their own clinical practice. Their input guides procedures for the upcoming semester and impacts the evolving program.

From this group of students emerges our next team of Undergraduate Associates, and from the team of Undergraduate Associates come our future Research Assistants. The Partnership Model’s cyclical flow of student energy and involvement is applied in yet another way. Because service-learning is embedded in a required nursing course, the program can be offered indefinitely with true sustainability.

Service-Learning Program Feedback

Using the same Likert scale as the project-based evaluations of service-learning, twenty-three junior-level nursing students rated their experience with the service-learning program in the impact areas of personal satisfaction, professional development, critical thinking skills, awareness of unmet community needs, and feelings of preparedness for practice (Table 2). The combined categories received a mean rating of 4.72/5.0 by the participants.

Table 2: Service-Learning Program Feedback
Student Ratings: 1-5, 5 is Highest Rating

N=23	Mean
Personal Satisfaction	4.74
Professional Development	4.78
Critical Thinking Skills	4.30
Awareness of Unmet Community Needs	5.00
Feelings of Preparedness for Practice	4.78
Combined Project Mean	4.72

As students reflected on their service-learning program experiences, the depth of the program-based approach became clear. Rather than discussing completed tasks or individual contributions to research, as they had in their project-based reflections, students spoke of inspiration, accomplishment, their group processes, and their critical thinking. One member of the required course stated, “The manner in which the program is designed allows students to take charge of their learning. Through organizing and delegating work within the group, we were able to come to a unified goal. This method of learning places greater responsibility on the student and allows the student to learn and grow with the help and direction of the group. This method of learning fosters independence, which in turn nurtures self esteem and personal growth.” One member of the program’s leadership team stated, “I have learned a lot about my ability to contribute as opposed to taking charge of projects. I feel a great surge of confidence. This project has allowed me to further develop ideations about my goals. I have learned that I have an unwavering fascination with social problems and I’m learning more about diving into them. It has been one of the healthiest contributions to my education as both a student and a life-long learner.” Another stated, “This has been an experience in unifying people, working collectively to deliver things that already exist to people that need them. At its basic elements, FOCUS is what I want my entire career to be about, helping those who need it. While I have been afforded an amazing opportunity that has far exceeded my hopes, this program has provided me with a feeling of empowerment and confidence that leaves me anxious to carry this experience into practice.

A Search for Significance

In order to adequately compare student feedback from the service-learning projects to the service-learning program experiences, they were analyzed to evaluate for statistical significance. The service-learning program showed significantly improved student ratings across every single category assessed (Table 3).

Table 3: WIC Project versus Service-Learning Program Comparison
Student Ratings: 1-5, 5 is Highest Rating

Impact Category	WIC Project Mean (N=28)	WIC Standard Deviation	Service-Learning Program Means (N=23)	Service-Learning Program Deviations	t	df	P (two-tailed)
Personal Satisfaction	3.4	0.62	4.74	0.54	8.13	49	0.0001*
Professional Development	4.2	0.89	4.78	0.52	2.75	49	0.0081*
Critical Thinking Skills	3.6	0.82	4.30	0.70	3.23	49	0.0022*
Awareness of Unmet Community Needs	3.85	0.9	5.0	0	6.11	49	0.0001*
Feelings of Preparedness for Practice	4.03	0.79	4.78	0.42	4.09	49	0.0002*

*Statistically Significant

Step 5: Plan and Implement Scholarly Achievements

In addition to the improved student ratings and measurable outcomes for the target population, which result from coordinated effort and collective impact, there are benefits for faculty. By developing one well-designed service-learning program, a faculty member creates a platform for studying impacts on the target population, impacts on the community partner, and impacts on the university students.

Time and energy can be coordinated so that one service-learning program meets the intertwined expectations of teaching, scholarship, and service. The Partnership Model allows faculty to streamline efforts, to make improvements in practice over time, and to enjoy the expanded outcomes for students and community partners through a focused research agenda. It becomes possible to conduct on-going research concerning student-perceived impacts which can be put to use for quality improvement, for SoTL (scholarship of teaching and learning) studies, and for presentation at professional conferences. By having a solid base for evaluation methods, which can be used repeatedly, faculty can put their efforts into analysis and improvement mechanisms rather than trying to come up with a brand new research topic over and over. By consistently gathering the same data, it becomes possible to view experiences in a variety of ways.

Step 5: Case Example

Delivery of the evidence-based curriculum is evaluated through regular, formal feedback from community partners and written responses from teen participants. Fidelity monitoring is completed through standardized toolkits that are completed by all nursing students and all hired staff who implement the program.

The Institutional Review Board has approved the use of evaluation instruments which are administered to teen program participants at baseline, 4 months post-intervention, and 12 months post-intervention. The disciplinary research agenda includes a five-year study on an STI (sexually transmitted infection) and pregnancy prevention program when taught through a service-learning pedagogical approach.

In addition to the disciplinary research being conducted, an on-going SoTL (scholarship of teaching and learning) study is under way. This research will quantify the student impact areas of personal satisfaction professional growth, critical thinking, feelings of preparedness for practice, and awareness of unmet community

health needs (Callister and Hobbins-Garbett, 2000). Data are continually collected, which will allow for multiple phases of analysis: 1) comparison of service-learning projects to service-learning programs, 2) comparison of the five “impact areas” mentioned above, side-by-side, 3) comparison of student outcomes when faculty have returned to a clinical site versus first-time service, 4) evaluation of student learning community feedback at the course level and at the leadership team level, and 5) analysis of extensive quantitative and qualitative feedback regarding service-learning impacts from the students’ perspective. Each of these studies is possible because of the consistent use of one Likert questionnaire and one reflection activity used over and over again.

CONCLUSION

The Partnership Model for service-learning seeks collective impact for each invested partner - community agencies, faculty members, students, and the extended target population. This theoretical commentary and set of associated cases is not meant to serve as a complete body of evidence in support of the proposed Partnership Model. However, preliminary student feedback supports the idea that experiential learning, occurring as part of a sustainable service-learning program versus a one-time service-learning “project”, is preferred.

Following the initial exploration of this topic and the development of the Partnership Model, the next step will be continued formalized studies with a mixed-methods approach. Through further analysis of quantitative feedback and the associated qualitative components, it will be possible to better understand key concepts, to identify consistent themes, and to gather more details on what sets the program-based experience apart from other service-learning opportunities. Further, it will be necessary to study these pedagogical techniques across disciplines and across educational settings.

Unless educators build sustainable partnerships which lead to on-going service agendas, students may be afforded very little autonomy, may have a limited voice in making improvements in practice, and may miss out on natural opportunities to engage because faculty are so engaged themselves (Flinders, et al, 2012). Authentic partnership, through a program-based model, allows students to move beyond one-time engagement and to more deeply understand that they can be the impetus of change throughout their own future careers.

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